

Off to the Races!

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Although it is no longer in existence today, the racetrack at the Ogle County Fairgrounds was an exciting and integral part of life in Oregon, Illinois. When most people think of the Ogle County Fair, or any fair for that matter, they tend to picture runnel cakes, the Tilt-A-Whirl, the exhibit building, and maybe cows. However, as recently as 12 years ago, along with these typical attractions, spectators lined up to see the thrilling sport of harness racing. The racetrack brought a little fame and fortune to this small town, and its demolition in 1992 was a sad day for many, especially those whose families had been racing since the beginning.

The Ogle County Fair had its humble beginnings in 1853. It was first held on the courthouse lawn with only a couple of classes and \$50 in premiums, and no races. How and when harness racing started is uncertain, but it is likely that it started with horseback races, and about 15 years after the start of the fair the harness racing began. In harness racing, a jockey sits in a sulky, a small streamlined cart, behind horses that are either pacing, which is moving right front and hind legs forward while left legs go back, or trotting, moving the right front and left back leg forward simultaneously. This fast paced exciting sport quickly caught on at the Ogle County Fair, and a racetrack was built.

The racetrack had a colorful history. As the Ogle County Fair began to grow, people from all over Illinois and the surrounding states brought their horses to race. Winners were awarded premiums, horse blankets, and trophies. These awards drew interesting people, including, according to legend, Jesse James and his gang in the 1870s. When the townspeople heard that these dangerous criminals were coming to their fair, they were prepared to be robbed and showed up with all sorts of artillery. As it turned out, Jesse James and his gang were merely interested in

racing their horses against the Oregon competition. They then continued on to Northfield, Minnesota, to actually rob a bank. It was there, however, that prepared citizens fought back and actually killed a few out of Jesse's gang, forcing the rest to flee.

The Oregon racetrack tried a few innovations as well, without much success. In 1895 gambling was allowed, but looked down upon and eventually prohibited once again. This did not deter race-goers from enjoying the main events. The racetrack owners tried another new idea in the 1930s, building possibly the first night-lighted track in the country. This creative idea failed to be lucrative however, and shareholders had to buy out the fairgrounds. They decided to continue the races, but this time only in the day.

These day races still helped draw many interesting characters and horses to the area. One such person was Judge James Cartwright, who founded Spring Vale Stock Farm just north of the fairgrounds. His farm was committed solely to raising trotting horses, and he had much to show for it. It was from this farm that the famous pacing mare Citation came. During this horse's prime, she tied the world record for her sex and gait: 2:01 3/4 at a race at Columbus, Ohio in 1908. This only added to the pride and prestige of Oregon harness racing.

In addition to Judge Cartwright's contributions to horse racing, the Burright family imparted much knowledge and esteem to Oregon's harness racing legacy. The most famous in this family was Neva Burright, affectionately called "Grandma" Burright. This woman was a fierce harness racer who won countless races against men and women alike, and continued racing into her 70s. She paved the way for women horse racers, was the first person elected into the Illinois Harness Horse Hall of Fame (IHHA Hall of Fame) and intimidated other racers so much that one of the best drivers ever, Seth Palin, is quoted as saying "I'm not going to have an old lady make a fool out of me," and actually scratched a race to avoid competing against her. Her family was also

big in harness racing, her daughter and son-in-law are also IHHA Hall of Fame inductees and spent much of their lives harness racing.

One can only imagine, with so much invested in this racetrack and the fairgrounds it occupied, the surprise the community felt when it was announced in 1992 that there would no longer be a fair in Ogle County. Many of the fair stockholders were reaching retirement age and wished to see a return on their investment, and therefore decided to put the property up for sale. In 1992 the grounds were sold to the Oregon Park District, developer Grant Landis, and Charles Mongan, Jr. The racetrack and grandstands were torn down and the property was converted into a park and a subdivision named Fairground Estates. With that, an era in Oregon had come to an end.

The racetrack on the Ogle County Fairgrounds in Oregon, Illinois had a vibrant and interesting past. The racers and spectators that it drew enhanced the culture in Oregon. Many citizens lives were changed by the involvement that they had in the thrilling sport of harness racing. When the track was closed in 1992, it was the end of something special and unique. However, it opened Oregon up to new settlement and new people, perhaps one with a plan for something even bigger and better. Only time will tell. [From Georgian Downs Limited, "About Harness Racing," www.georgiandowns.com (Sept. 24, 2003); Charles Mongan, ed., *The Story of Oregon, Illinois*; *Chicago Sun Times*, July 18, 1966; *Ogle County News*, Jan. 16, July 22, 1992; Richard K. Jones, "Racin' on the River," *Hoofbeats*, (Aug. 1991); *Oregon Republican Reporter*, (Oct. 11, 1986); Tom, Shinn, "Jack and Joyce Hankin: A Portrait of the All-American Harness Racing Family," *Hoofbeats*, (Nov. 1988).]